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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: With reformers largely vetted out of the March 14 Iranian Majles elections, the main competition is between hardline conservatives loosely associated with President Ahmadinejad, and the more pragmatic conservatives associated with former National Security Council secretary Larijani, former IRGC commander Rezaie, and Tehran mayor Qalibaf. The two main conservative coalitions are the United Front of Principle-ists (UFP) which is comprised of ultra-right hardline groups, and the Broad and Popular Coalition of Principle-ists (BPCP), which comprises the more pragmatic traditional conservative groups. Although UFP contains some groups that support Ahmadinejad, it also includes some of his conservative critics, such as Majles speaker Haddad-Adel, Deputy Majles speaker Bahonar, and the head of the Majles Research Center Tavakkoli. IRPO contacts expect that the pragmatic conservatives will do well at the polls on Friday and expressed mixed views about whether there was a significant difference in the platforms of the two conservative groups. If the BPCP dominates these elections as expected, they may use the Majles forum to step up their criticism of Ahmadinejad and prepare ground for the 2009 presidential elections, although their ideological platform does not appear to differ greatly from the ultra-right. That said, some analysts have indicated they could seek better relations with the international community. End summary.

Reformers--a spent force

2.(C) Having been heavily vetted out of the Majles elections by the Interior Ministry and Guardian Council and facing allegations of being Western lackeys, Iran's reformers are essentially not competitive in the March 14 Majles elections. The main reformist coalition, which includes two of the largest reformist parties--the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF, also called Mosharekat) and the Mojahideen of the Islamic Revolution (MIRO)--will reportedly only be able to contest 90 of the 290 Majles seats. Former Majles speaker Mehdi Karrubi's National Trust Party (also called National Confidence Party) announced that it can contest 160 seats. The three reformist

lists for Tehran have several names in common. The news organ of the National Trust Party, Etemad-e-Melli, reported March 9 that its party shares 15 names in common with the Reformist Coalition list, and 18 names in common with the Popular Reformist Coalition, which is close to the National Trust party and run by Mehdi Karrubi's wife Fatemeh.

3.(C) In the last week before the elections, conservatives have stepped up attacks against reformers. Contact with Western diplomats and claims of expressions of support from the US administration have exposed Iran's reformers to accusations of disloyalty. Hardline daily Keyhan attacked former deputy Majles speaker Mohammad Reza Khatami this week for meeting with the German ambassador to Tehran. According to AFP, Keyhan printed a purported partial transcript of the conversation in which Khatami expressed concerns about the Iranian nuclear program and the Majles elections. Foreign ministry spokesman Hosseini accused the US administration this week of trying to undermine Iranian national unity through statements of support for "certain political movements" (i.e. reformers). Intelligence Minister Ejei accused reformist MP Nouredin Pirmoazzen of treason for a March 9 interview on Voice of America in which the MP criticized the disqualifications of reformist candidates from the elections. (Comment: These high-profile attacks against reformers on the eve of the elections may be intended to paper over the appearance of conservative disunity caused by pre-election infighting. They may also be designed to woo undecided voters to the conservative side by portraying reformers as traitors to the nation. End comment.)

4.(S) In any case, reformers in their current form are viewed by some as a spent force in Iran. One analyst said the reformers were too focused on appearing the victim to be able to project an image of strength. He criticized reformers for not reaching out to the lower-middle class, even as many in the provinces had become disenchanted with the president for not living up to promises made on his visits. The source said that in some cases, Ahmadinejad's promises were left unfulfilled, in others the results were mismanaged. This analyst had written off the

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reformist IIIPF (Mosharekat) but thought the National Trust Party may fare better. He noted that some reformist candidates chose voluntarily to opt out of elections.

Conservatives-internecline squabbling

15. (S) Internal squabbling prevented the conservatives-who increasingly refer to themselves as principle-ists-from unifying on a single electoral list. The two main conservative coalitions are the United Front of Principle-ists (UFP, also called United Fundamentalist Front) which is comprised of ultra-right groups, and the Broad and Popular Coalition of Principle-ists (BPCP, also called Comprehensive Coalition of Principle-ists), which comprises the more pragmatic traditional conservative groups. A third coalition called the Progressive Principle-ist Front was created by former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, according to domestic press reports. Fallahian was reportedly first allied with the UFP, but broke with them in mid-February after UFP reportedly declined to include him on their electoral list. The Tehran-based analyst predicted that an increasing number of former intelligence officials were likely to enter politics.

16. (S) The UFP has been associated in the press with President Ahmadinejad, and although it does contain some groups that support him, it also includes some of his conservative critics, such as Majles speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, Majles Research Center head Ahmad Tavakkoli, Deputy Majles speaker Mohammad Reza Bamonar, and MP Elias Naderan. (Note: Tavakkoli's public criticism of the UFP list was mistakenly reported in RPO Dubai 0008 as his separation from the UFP list. Endnote.) The BPCP is associated with former National Security Council secretary Larijani, former IRGC commander Rezaie, and Tehran mayor

Qalibaf, who represent the more technocratic and pragmatic conservatives. Ayatollah Mahdavi-Kani, the influential head of the conservative Militant Clergy Association, failed in his attempts to unify the conservatives and ultimately supported the UFP. One Tehran-based analyst told IRPOffs that it was significant that such an influential regime figure as Mahdavi-Kani was unable to unify the conservative groups. He implied that although divisions are deeper than they appear, the divisions were not for the most part policy differences. When asked why Bahaonar would join the UFP list, given his clear differences with the president, the analyst said that longstanding social ties in Iranian society often trump ideological differences. A Western diplomat posted in Tehran also assessed that these divisions among conservatives are due largely to personality differences and disagreements over elections planning than to any ideological or major policy differences among conservatives.

7.(S) The Tehran-based analyst suggested that Larijani opted to run from Qom in order not to challenge (and potentially embarrass) Haddad-Adel, who leads both conservative lists. A US-based Iranian political analyst said separately that he thought Larijani ran from Qom only because he felt he would get a stronger electoral mandate there than in Tehran, given that Larijani's father was a Qom-based ayatollah and seminary lecturer. If both Larijani and Haddad-Adel are elected, it will be noteworthy whether Larijani will try to challenge Haddad Adel for the position of Majles speaker. Both analysts thought that it was likely that Haddad-Adel would run for president in 2009, and Larijani would then succeed him as Majles speaker.

8.(S) The economy is the biggest campaign issue for candidates from all political groups, with official statistics putting inflation at over 20%. Many conservatives are attempting to distance themselves from President Ahmadinejad and his failed economic policies by criticizing the government's economic performance, and calling for different economic policies. The US-based analyst said that the competition for seats in the provinces and rural areas is focused more on local issues than national political trends, but that in the large cities-particularly Tehran-the competition is almost entirely about national-level politics, especially the economy.

Electoral procedures and campaigning

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9.(U) The electoral procedures for the Iranian Majles elections contain some elements of proportional representation, but

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Iranians ultimately will cast their votes for individual candidates, although they can opt to select a list in its entirety. The electoral lists that have been compiled by the various political groupings are, in essence, voting guides. For example, Iran's most important electoral constituency, Tehran, has 30 seats in the Majles. On election day, each Tehran resident chooses 30 candidates from among the reported 827 candidates who are running in Tehran. Once the results are tallied, the seats go to the 30 candidates who received the most votes. Interior Minister Purmohammadi said March 13 that the Interior Ministry hopes to have final elections results before the Iranian new year (Nowruz) on March 21. According to Iranian press, if a second round of polling is required, those elections may not take place until late April or early May.

10.(U) These elections will see the introduction of some computerized counting. Deputy Interior Minister Mousapour told Iranian press that there will be electronic vote counting alongside hand counting, in order to test the electronic vote counting technology. Reportedly, voters can choose to vote with either a paper or an electronic ballot.

11.(S) Of the 290 seats in the Majles, five are set aside for representatives of Iran's recognized religious minorities: two seats for Armenian Christians, and one seat each for Assyrian

Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Polling is reportedly held in community centers or places of worship of the respective communities. There has been little press coverage of those races. The US-based Iranian analyst asserted that the choice of representatives for these communities is generally decided among the respective communities before the elections, and the vote is essentially a formality.

12.(U) Apart from limiting official campaign time to the week prior to the elections, the government has introduced additional restrictions, including banning the placement of photos or posters in public places. Photos are reportedly only permitted in fliers that are handed out during election week. There were also rumors that the Internet would be blocked on election day, which Interior Minister Purmohammadi denied, although a reformist press website Norooz reported on March 11 that Yahoo email and chat services were blocked by several internet service providers.

13.(S) IRPO contacts report that public interest in the elections is minimal. One Iranian reform-minded political science professor said the timing of the elections-one week before Iran's biggest holiday, Nowruz-has contributed to this. People are too busy shopping, cleaning their homes, and visiting relatives to pay much attention to the elections, he said. He said he was so disenchanted with the election that for the first time, he would not vote.

Electoral interference?

14.(S) IRPO contacts seem widely to expect that there will be some degree of electoral interference. Contacts almost invariably assume there will be a strong presence of Basij forces at polling stations and suggest that other unspecified interference is possible. The acting commander of the Basij, Hossein Taeb, was quoted in the Iranian press in late February saying that Basij should have a "maximum presence" in the elections. The Supreme Leader's representative to the Basij also said in press articles that the Basij should play an important role in "preparing the ground for the maximum participation of the people." When asked why IRGC Commander Jafari would have openly called for support for principle-ist candidates, one analyst suggested that Iranians in the public sphere have a hard time remembering that their remarks reach other audiences than the one in front of them.

15.(S) When asked how authorities may try to manipulate votes in this election, the Tehran-based political analyst asserted that there was low likelihood of overt technical interference in the elections, but that local Basij leaders, clerics, and other opinion leaders would exert influence in support of various conservative candidates. (Comment: Given that both conservative groups have factional support from the IRGC, it is not clear which group would benefit most from IRGC/Basij meddling. End comment) The US-based Iranian analyst said that Majles candidates in the provinces often receive funds for unofficial campaigning (e.g. hosting dinners for religious

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ceremonies, helping the destitute, paying people's debts, etc.) from organizations in Tehran, such as the bonyads, the IRGC, and others with which they might be affiliated. He noted the dominance of economic discourse in the campaigns, citing an article this week in the conservative Jomhuri-ye-Eslami newspaper which criticized candidates for not talking about Islam enough. According to the article, there are very few clerics running in these Majles elections compared to previous rounds and that even the list of one of the best known clerical organizations in Iran (not named) has only about 6% clerics on the list. The article predicts a downward trend of clerical participation in the future.

16.(S) Comment: Iranian elections often yield surprising results; however, if the Broad and Popular Coalition of

Principle-ists dominate the election as many observers have predicted, they may use the forum of the Majles to step up their criticism of President Ahmadinejad and lay the groundwork for a Qalibaf presidency. As laid out in reftel, electoral dominance by this group is unlikely to result in major immediate shifts in Iranian policy. However, their presence in the Majles-and willingness to criticize the president--could act as a counterweight to the ultra-rightists in the current administration. The Tehran-based analyst predicted that pragmatic conservatives would take control of the Majles this year and the presidency next year. He said that judging by Qalibaf's positive and technocratic leadership of the Tehran municipality, this analyst reasoned that a Qalibaf presidency could eventually produce more pragmatic shifts in policy and increased outreach to the West and the international community. That said, one Western diplomat posted in Tehran asserted that the pragmatic conservatives are vulnerable to accusations of not being sufficiently revolutionary, and may feel obliged to adjust their statements accordingly. In any case, ultimate policy decisions will remain in the hands of the Supreme Leader.

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